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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/14/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: SYRIAN AMBASSADOR PROTESTS U.S. FUNDING FOR
DEMOCRACY PROGRAMMING

Classified By: NEA - Ronald Schlicher, Acting, for reasons 1.4(b,d)

Summary

¶1. (C) The Syrian Ambassador protested the U.S. government's allocation of USD 2.5 million for democracy programming in Syria, saying that Damascus was "upset" to learn that the U.S. was channeling money to local organizations in violation of Syrian law. Claiming that the previous Administration had funded programs in Syria to "destabilize the regime," the Ambassador said Damascus was concerned to see a similar policy from the new Administration, even as it sought to improve bilateral relations. Although unwilling to equate "democracy" with "destabilization," the Ambassador said it was the principle of USG money being programmed to "foment illegal behavior" in Syria that the SARG found unacceptable. End summary.

Protesting Democracy Funding in Syria

¶2. (C) In a December 10 meeting with NEA DAS Maura Connelly, Syrian Ambassador Imad Mustafa protested the U.S. government's allocation of USD 2.5 million for democracy programming in Syria. Mustafa said he became aware of the funding during a recent Congressional hearing, when Rep. Brad Sherman (D-CA) requested assurances from the State Department that U.S. funding for "democracy in Syria" would not be "handed to President Asad or his government." Mustafa said SARG leadership in Damascus was still "upset" by the revelation that the USG was channeling money into Syria, and had instructed him to lodge an official protest. Mustafa had instead chosen to send a letter to Rep. Sherman on November 19, with copies to other committee members and NEA Bureau, dissuading the USG "from encouraging local organizations in foreign countries to break their domestic laws and face trial."

A violation of Syrian law

¶3. (C) Mustafa argued that Syrian laws prohibit domestic organizations -- both governmental and NGOs -- from accepting money from the U.S. government. As such, offering U.S. funding to Syrian organizations was tantamount to asking Syrians to break their own laws and risk punishment. Since no "respectable" NGO would dare accept "illegal money," he said, the U.S. funding was actually ending up in the hands of "racketeers and charlatans" who regularly operated outside the law. DAS Connelly, without indicating how the funds might be spent, commented that the objectives for which the funds were appropriated need not necessarily require that the

funds be provided to Syrian NGOs.

Trying to destabilize the regime?

¶4. (C) Mustafa said Damascus was surprised to hear the Obama Administration had decided to continue democracy funding in Syria. He alleged that former Under Secretary for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns had testified "three years ago" that the USG had stopped allocating money to "destabilize" the Syrian government and had redirected those funds to other priorities. DAS Connelly challenged him on his implicit linkage and asked if he believed that the purpose of democracy programming was to destabilize the Syrian government. Mustafa demurred, saying it was the principle of USG money being programmed to foment illegal behavior in Syria that the SARG found unacceptable. "I'm sure you would find it unacceptable if the Syrian government was distributing cash to Hamas affiliates in the United States," he concluded.

Comment

¶5. (C) Mustafa raised his concern at the beginning of a meeting to discuss a possible visit by U/S Burns (P) to Damascus early next year. If, indeed, Damascus is as upset as Mustafa claims, SARG leaders may raise the issue of democracy programming during the P visit, as well as in meetings with SEMEP Mitchell and his staff.
CLINTON